

## University of Windsor Scholarship at UWindsor

---

OSSA Conference Archive

OSSA 3

---

May 15th, 9:00 AM - May 17th, 5:00 PM

# Commentary on Novak

Jill LeBlanc

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

---

LeBlanc, Jill, "Commentary on Novak" (1999). *OSSA Conference Archive*. 98.  
<http://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive/OSSA3/papersandcommentaries/98>

This Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at Scholarship at UWindsor. It has been accepted for inclusion in OSSA Conference Archive by an authorized conference organizer of Scholarship at UWindsor. For more information, please contact [scholarship@uwindsor.ca](mailto:scholarship@uwindsor.ca).

**Author:** [Jill LeBlanc](#)

**In Response To:** Joseph Novak's [Aristotle's Topics and informal reasoning](#)  
(c)2000 Jill LeBlanc

---

## Commentary on Joseph Novak's "Aristotle's *Topics* and informal reasoning"

Prof. Novak's examples are interesting, and show us that contrariety is applicable to natural speech and writing (not "cooked-up" textbook examples). He suggests that the Topics might be useful for students by giving them a new logical "topography" in terms of which they can analyse and criticize arguments. For my students, I think on balance that it would not, even if I lied by omission and failed to tell them this was Aristotle.

One thing in favour of the point of view that the Topics could benefit students is the practical "how-to" attitude suggested by the second-person address of the Topics. E.g. we read "Look and see if he has stated a thing to be an accident of itself" [112b21], "you should look for arguments among the contradictories of your terms" [113b15], "look also at the case of the contraries of S and P in the thesis" [113b26]. This would suggest a loose method: *method*, since there is a set of rules to follow; *loose*, in the comforting sense that forgetting one instruction will not render the entire topic nugatory. An argument can still be destroyed, even though valid criticisms remain; and an argument can be made even if it is not made from every basis.

On the opposite side, however, let's consider Arnauld and Nicole. In the *Port-Royal Logic*, there is a section called "Topics, or the method of finding arguments. How useless this method is". Although, as Prof. Novak points out, the Topics has been ignored throughout this century, it was anything but ignored at the time of Port Royal. By the mid-17th century, topics as one aspect of logic had held sway for hundreds of years -- not only Aristotle, but also Boethius, Cicero, Quintilian, and so on. You might expect that the reason that Arnauld dismisses the Topics is that these sorts of arguments will not result in indubitable and certain scientific knowledge. But he says that the "main use of reason" is not scientific matters demanding certainty ("in which it is less dangerous to be mistaken"), but morality and the conduct of life (the home of dialectic). It seems, rather, that his complaint is that the Topics can never result in the creation of an eloquent argument. He says that in fact, no one who reasons well ever *uses* knowledge of the topics in order to do so.

Consult as many lawyers and preachers as there are in the world, as many people who speak and write ... and I do not know if you could find among them anyone who ever thought of making an argument *a causa*, *ab effectu*, or *ab adjunctis*, for proving whatever he wanted to convince others of.

It seems, then, that Arnauld's interest is in exactly the question of the

pedagogical value of the Topics.

There are two main objections that Arnauld brings. First, reasoning is a practical skill, and

thus is not best instilled by means of learning theoretical principles. While it is true that principles of reasoning like those in the Topics can be gleaned from the speech of eloquent people, these principles *describe* the eloquence; they are not the principles used by the eloquent person in creating his argument. Similarly, we walk, and can describe walking in terms of the animal spirits, the muscles, the joints, etc. But knowing all of the physiological principles of walking would not help someone learn to walk.

Second, not only do good speakers not in fact use topics in reasoning; also, teaching and encouraging people to use topics will prevent them from thinking well. They will become accustomed to thinking along the lines given by the topics; and stifle any thoughts not in line with what they have learned. They will multiply common and banal thoughts, and produce “a confused mass of good and bad arguments”. Arnauld says that if we really wanted to teach people eloquence, we should teach them to be silent rather than to speak; the topics, however, presents a way of talking about everything and finding reasons everywhere.

Like Arnauld, we can distinguish between the theoretical description of ways of reasoning, and the practical exhortation to the student “Here’s how to do it”. From the first theoretical point of view, I think that it would be interesting indeed to see the formulation suggested by Prof. Novak. On the practical side, I am more in agreement with Arnauld.

How or what do we actually teach students? At a minimum, whatever else we teach, we must teach them to pay attention to arguments, to realize that there is a sort of talking and thinking and writing that consists of giving reasons to believe that something is true. Ideally, they would also then learn that some arguments are better than others. Although this is a practical skill, if they are to learn it at the university level, they have to be presented with theoretical material, that is difficult enough for the level. One hopes that at least some students, although forgetting theoretical designations like “ad hominem” or “primary subject”, remember what those designations were meant to draw attention to. Arnauld puts it this way:

...the entire benefit we can derive from the topics comes down, at best, to taking on, unwittingly, a general tendency that may be slightly useful to consider the subject under discussion by more of its aspects and parts.

Probably there will be failings in any theoretical material being used as a framework for teaching practical skills, but would the Topics do the job as well as anything else?

I do not think so. If we are teaching a practical skill, we may as well teach according to what students expect and believe. Speaking of properties, accidents, differentia, and so on, would require teaching the students Aristotelian metaphysics. While I, personally, think that people can only benefit from Aristotelian metaphysics, teaching that to my students, in order to teach them reasoning skills, would annoy them more than I can express.